Famous Artists Painting Course
Famous Artists Schools, Inc., Westport, Connecticut

Section **16**

Figure composition

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AUGUSTE RENOIR
Luncheon of the Boating Party
The Phillips Collection

Fourteen people and a dog are presented in this painting. The figure organization is handled with such assurance, however, that there is no sense of crowding or confusion. Twelve of the figures have been grouped together at the right to balance the two stalwart figures on the left. Both figure groups have been combined into patterns clearly silhouetted against the background. Within the large group, smaller groups of three and two figures have been made, giving the organization a natural and informal quality characteristic of the actual situation. The painting is filled with invisible "sight lines" which are as important in lacing the composition together as are the actual shape patterns. Notice that every figure is clear and distinct because the artist was careful to set it against a contrasting background, but he has not permitted delineation of the individual to destroy the unity of the group pattern. The great variety of individual poses helps convey the friendly and quiet animation of the scene.

Figure composition

Composing a picture restricted to inanimate forms, like buildings or mountains or trees, is a comparatively simple matter. These forms can be altered in shape or position quite radically without changing their meaning. They can't think or feel, and if we paint them so that they seem to have a "mood," it is our mood they are reflecting rather than their own.

The situation is changed completely, however, when we begin to work with the human figure. The human being is a conscious, thinking, feeling, dynamic form. In contrast with the unfeeling, unmoving forms of nature, every human being has his own reactions to the world around him, and expresses his mood and his will in an almost infinite range of variations in pose and gesture.

Since we are men, we are particularly sensitive to variations in human expression. We need only look at a person's eyes to imagine much of what he is thinking or feeling. Even when we cannot see the features, from the way the person is sitting or standing, the curve of the back, the tilt of the head, the position of feet and hands, we can tell a great deal about his attitude and mood. Furthermore, the human body is so subtle in its means of expression that the slightest change in pose or features will project an entirely different psychological idea.

These are the considerations which make composing the human figure a more difficult problem than working with other forms of nature. We all know the figure so well that the slightest distortion is immediately evident, whether the distortion is one of physical proportions and construction, or of psychological reaction. We must be very careful to observe what we are drawing, and obviously the more we know about how the figure is put together — how it "works" — the more convincing our painting will be.

Aside from these considerations, composing the human figure is no different from composing any other form of nature. All the principles of repetition and variation, of rhythmic organization, of simplification, of consistent design and pattern, are equally valid. In many respects it is even easier to work with the figure than with other forms, because the human body is so flexible that we can adapt it to almost any simple compositional arrangement.

It is best to avoid forcing the figure into a pattern, however, or it will look stiff and lifeless. The best approach in posing the figure is to decide on the general design we would like to develop in the composition, and then let the model find a pose which is

Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art

DAUMIER. The Third Class Carriage

As a touching genre study this painting has few peers. The setting, a railway coach, affords the individuals time to reflect or converse, and provides the artist with an opportunity to make a carefully posed and most revealing study. The accent is on personality. The old grandmother in the center is of course our chief concern; all the compositional planning is designed to center attention on her. Notice how the other forms build up around her like a pyramid.

Owned by the artist

BORRA. Concert for Two Flutes

Here the individual is seen as part of a social group, and therefore personal differences have been played down. Using the basic clothed figure, the artist has built up a strong architectonic structure. The spherical form of the head supplies the major motif. This is played against a careful organization of figure forms simplified to the extent of early Renaissance paintings of the Florentine school.

Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art

CHARPENTIER.
Charlotte du Val d'Ognes

The perennial popularity of this portrait as a public favorite did not change when it was re-attributed from David to his little-known pupil Charpentier. Much of the charm of this painting lies in the graceful, natural pose of the figure, arranged in graceful diagonals against a rigid background of verticals and horizontals.

Palazzo Ducale

TINTORETTO. The Forge of Vulcan

The human figure is so flexible that it provides an almost infinite variety of arrangements for the artist who can control it. This is a highly virtuoso construction. Around the forge the figure forms radiate in a wheel-like pattern. To handle such foreshortening effectively, the artist must have a thorough understanding of anatomy and superb drawing technique.

Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art

RUBENS. Venus and Adonis

The fascination of this painting arises partly from the contrast between the flowing curves of the female form and the heavily muscled strength of the male figure. These are arranged in a pyramidal pattern. The little cherub, besides playing a part in the story and filling an awkward hole in the composition, introduced the chubby figure of the child as an interesting contrast with the mature figures.

Coll. Madame Emile Staub-Terlinden, Mannendorf

DAUMIER. Sidewalk Art

The tilt of the head, the angle of the back, the twist of the torso can reveal almost as much as facial expression. Although the forms here are shown predominantly as silhouettes, they convey precise shades of emotional reaction. This painting demonstrates that the *gesture* of the figure is even more important than a detailed rendering of features or parts.

natural and convincing. Giving the model a clear idea of what is wanted is usually much more effective than directing her to move her arms and legs about until they match your idea of what the pose should be. The more realistic and intimate you want the picture to be, the more important it is to pose the figures naturally. On the other hand, if you plan to generalize the whole treatment, you can sometimes make your figure poses more formal, since the whole approach is then impersonal and absolute.

In planning the composition and making your preliminary sketches, it's best to rough in the body as an assembly of simple geometric forms. The head is a sphere, the trunk is a cylinder, the arms and legs are a most adaptable group of cylindrical material. If you approach the figure this way, you can avoid being distracted by non-essential and confusing details of clothing or feature. Remember that such details have no place in preliminary compositional planning, when you should be thinking of the larger considerations of gesture and shape.

There is one factor which you must always keep in mind, however, even if you are working in the simplest terms. That is the question of what is going on in the figure's head. What is the figure's mood? What is he aware of? What is he doing, and to what extent does his gesture reveal his thoughts? Above all, where is the figure looking?

This question of where the figure is looking is extremely important in compositional planning, because the gaze of the figure will create a "sight line" that is likely to be one of the strongest lines in the composition. It is a quirk of human nature that we always look in the direction that other people are looking. Therefore, the position of the head, the direction the person is facing, is of key importance in compositional design.

Once the composition is established, you can go on to develop the painting in any way you like. You can depersonalize the figures so that they become almost human symbols, or you can create detailed character studies. That is a matter of your own taste and style, and depends entirely upon what you want to say in your painting.

Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

FANTIN-LATOUR. Embroiderers

The over-all pattern of the figure action — the *gesture* of the figure — is the whole story here. Features are only suggested, but the work is tremendously expressive. Notice how carefully hard and soft edges have been handled to control the eye.

Permanent Collection, Dallas Museum of Fine Arts

BOARDMAN ROBINSON. Entombment

The emotional quality of quiet grief is conveyed here entirely through compositional designing. Consider the sacklike forms in the middle of the painting. They epitomize the idea of mourning, but we would not even know they were human beings if the flanking figures on either side were not more clearly identified. Here, without detail of feature, without realistic anatomy, but entirely through the *gesture* of the figure and its organization in the composition, the artist has presented a statement of emotion more stark and powerful, perhaps, than any realistic handling could have achieved.

The Louvre

CÉZANNE. The Card Players

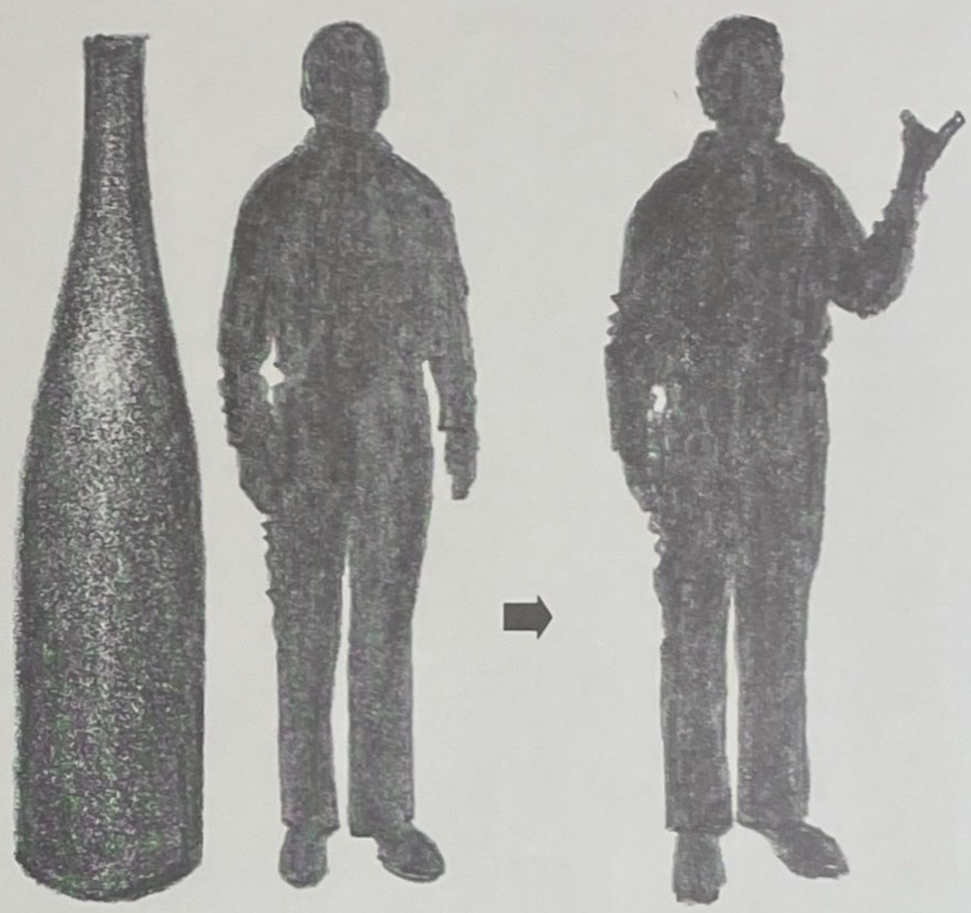
The stolid figures are placed like pyramids in space, brooding in silence. Anatomy and features are of secondary significance; what counts is the distribution and realization of forms. If these were inanimate, unliving objects their relationship would be slight. Since they are men their concentration on one spot helps tie the picture together with powerful, though invisible, "sight lines." In composing figures, pay particular attention to the direction of their glance. This is often more important than any other factor in the composition.

The figure is a living, changing shape

The drawings on this page demonstrate the striking difference between the human figure and the fixed shape of an inanimate object. The figure is alive — it is a mobile form which constantly changes shape. It can stretch out, curl up, lean, bend — assume countless different positions.

It is this very aliveness that makes pictures with figures so interesting. When we put two bottles in a picture, they may stand side by side or overlap, but they are still inanimate objects. It is very different when we place two figures together. They immediately seem to be related, to respond to each other. If they are facing, they may seem to be talking. If they are looking in the same direction, they may appear to be gazing at the same object. Depending on the attitudes or gestures we give our figures, the meaning of the picture will change.

We can say only a limited number of things with still-life objects — but with the living, changing figure we can express the whole range of human relationships and experiences.



The bottle represents a typical inanimate object — a fixed shape. By contrast, the figure next to it, even in a static standing pose, has the quality of life. The simple raising of an arm creates a new shape and a new meaning.

See — Observe — Remember

Two bottles are no less inanimate than one. But adding one figure to another creates an entirely new situation. These two figures react to each other. They form a human relationship. One man talks, the other listens.

Here are just a few of the countless gestures the figure can assume. The upraised arms express excitement, the slump tells of weariness or sorrow. Bending over or pointing, the figure actively relates to something else.

Our two figures can express many moods and feelings — the friendliness of a handshake, the fear and menace of a holdup, the heat of an argument. In each, the mobile figure's shape explains the situation.

How the action of the figure expresses its mood

Mood symbols to aid meaning

In an earlier section we learned that the head and hands are the most expressive parts of the figure. But the body itself expresses emotion, too. Much of the art of the artist in arranging a figure composition consists in using the whole figure expressively. He must show the feelings and emotions by the action of the body.

When the body moves, it creates different shapes which we associate with different moods or feelings. The droop of weariness or the spring of joy are typical associations of figure action with feeling. The good artist knows how clearly these actions communicate mood and feeling and uses them to their fullest in his pictures. It is helpful to think of these expressive actions or gestures in terms of mood symbols which quickly convey the feeling of the figure. The most basic of these symbols and their relationship to the figure are shown on these two pages.

In real life the emotions are often confused or not expressed clearly by the action. For example, a person may assume a pose that suggests sorrow although he is actually quite happy. We are not aware of this discrepancy in real life because the person's words may reveal his feelings or because in a moment he will move and assume a gesture that fits them better. There is no place for such accidental or contradictory gestures in a picture. The one view you show must be the right one – the clear one – the one that expresses just the emotion you want.

Happy, bright, gay: Here the outstretched arms and legs help form a shape which literally radiates gladness. The whole soaring action is one of joy.

Weary, sad, dejected: This mood is in direct contrast to the one above. Notice how clearly the sagging, drooping gesture expresses sorrow, guilt, or fatigue.

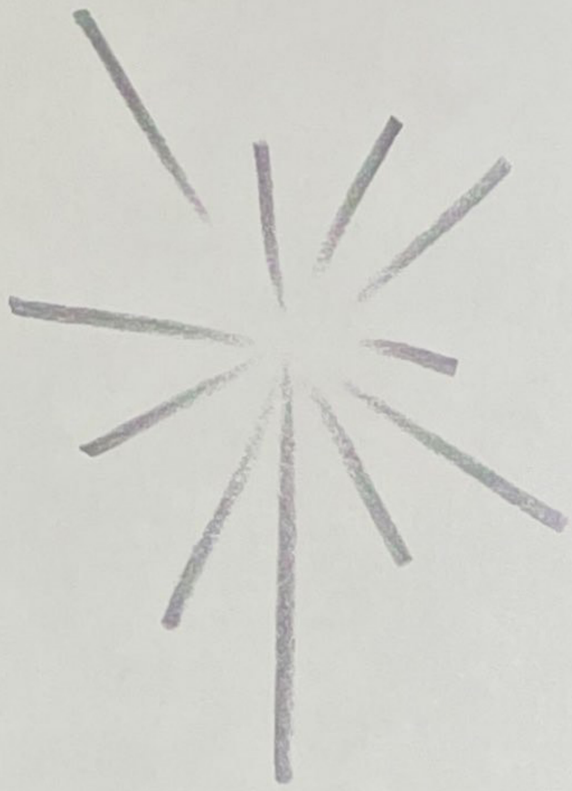
Quiet, gentle, sensual: Rhythmic, flowing shapes with soft, curving lines make up this mood symbol. Angular forms are minimized.

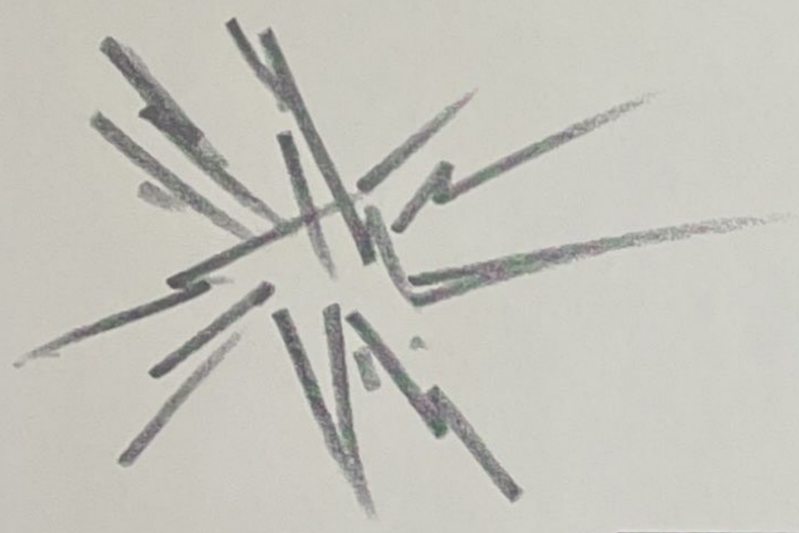
Dramatic, explosive, exciting: Although as energetic as our symbol of joy, this one is more powerful and dramatic. Its jagged lines and sharp angles create a strong feeling of action and drama.

Aspiring, righteous, dominating: This figure has a vertical quality which gives us a feeling of stability and strength. Its upward-reaching lines may also suggest an aspiring or spiritual mood.

EDGAR DEGAS
Ballet Rehearsal (detail)
Courtesy Mrs. George G. Frelinghuysen

Underlying this pose is the symbol of gaiety or happiness. The radiating lines of arms, legs, and skirt work with the background to make the mood light and airy.



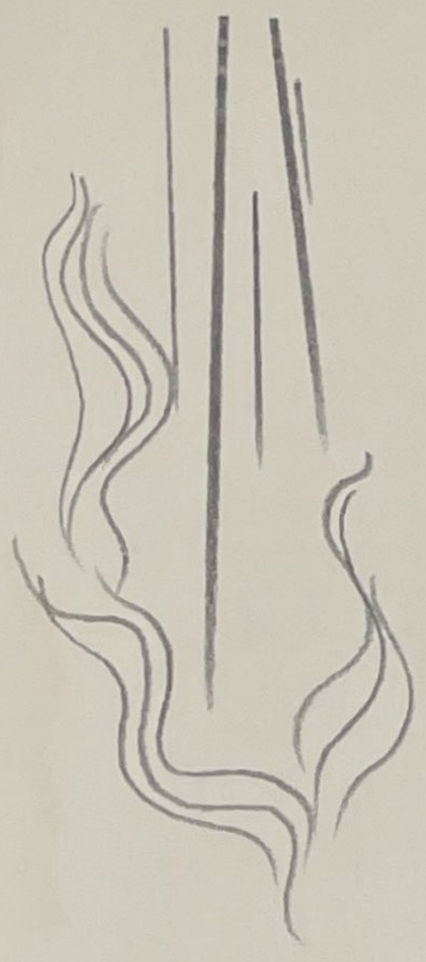


Mood symbols in action

The illustrations on these two pages are excellent examples of how mood symbols can guide us in developing an effective pose. Each of the pictures expresses a distinct mood – and this mood is immediately and clearly established by the action of the figures.

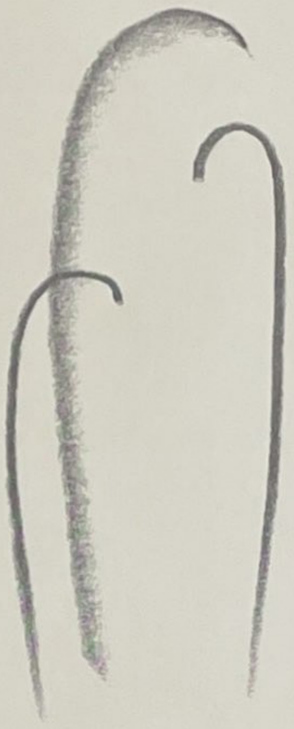
Violent action and a strong feeling of excitement characterize this vigorous design by Fletcher Martin. The figures of the umpire, the runner, and the catcher form a series of active diagonal shapes and lines that convey the drama of the slide into home plate.

FLETCHER MARTIN
Out At Home
Courtesy Mr. Mike Manuche



PABLO PICASSO
The Tragedy
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Chester Dale Collection

In this famous picture from Picasso's "blue period," note how the artist helped convey the mood by the shapes of the three figures. These figures are almost pure symbols. The bowed heads create a "weeping willow" line that suggests a drooping stillness, a mood of sadness and dejection. There is nothing in the stark background to distract from this effect. The simple horizon line emphasizes the feeling of quiet.



Here El Greco has combined two mood symbols to create feelings of solemnity, grandeur, and excitement. The vertical figure of Christ, tall and austere, dominates the painting. Below, the other figures swirl about in every direction, expressing confusion and astonishment. At the same time, the main lines of the composition all lead the viewer's eye in an ascending movement to the rising figure of Christ.

EL GRECO
The Resurrection
Museo del Prado, Madrid

BEN STAHL
Salome
Courtesy Coronet

See how much mood symbols contribute to the meaning of this picture. The sensual, voluptuous figure of Salome contrasts dramatically with St. John the Baptist, who is a dignified spiritual symbol.

Select the most descriptive pose

In our section on form drawing we showed you that it is very important to choose a view of an object that makes it easy to recognize. We used a teapot and a sugar bowl to demonstrate that a form can be clear or confusing depending on the angle from which we view it.

When we compose figures in a picture, there is not only the view to be considered but the pose as well. Because the figure is so highly mobile, it can express the same action by many different gestures and attitudes. Some of these are more descriptive and recognizable than others. We must select one that is entirely suitable to our purpose, expressing just as much as possible by two-dimensional shape or silhouette alone.

The illustrations below show why this is necessary. Although all six are possible views of the same action, one describes it with the greatest clarity and drama. One of the things that contribute to the success of the pictures on the opposite page, all with two or more figures, is that the artists arrived at a figure arrangement that got their idea across instantly. Make it a rule to try out your figures in different compositions until you have found a clear and expressive way to arrange them.

The problem: To show a clear and dramatic view of a fainting girl in a man's arms.

1 The girl is unconscious, clearly enough, but the grip the man has on her looks like a wrestling hold. His upraised hand may even lead us to suspect he has strangled her.

2 The situation is still obscure. It looks as though the man is lifting the girl from the ground. The action is spread out too much and it is clumsy.

3 One figure almost hides the other so that we cannot be sure what is happening. The girl seems to be in a state of emotional collapse rather than a faint.

4 Is he teaching her an exercise? Because the girl's feet are in an active pose on the ground, it is not clear that she has fainted. The over-all shape of the two figures is quite awkward.

5 Although the relationship between the two figures is better than before, it is still far from perfect. The man's figure is not involved enough in the action and he appears to be studying the girl.

6 **Final choice:** In this pose the figures express the action clearly and effectively. Every line of the girl's form slumps — every line of the man's is angular and active. There is no question but that he is supporting her dead weight. The fact that he is looking at her face gives the two a personal relationship, and the front view helps us to see this. All of the other drawings show the same situation, but none does so as dramatically as this one.

HONORÉ DAUMIER
"Plead Not Guilty"

Daumier's lawyer and client are carefully posed to get across the point of the picture. We are given a full view of the defendant's worried face so there can be no mistaking his emotion. The silhouette shows us at once the conspiratorial closeness of the two figures; the lawyer's cap and the client's disheveled head also aid us in understanding the subject. Design helps to tell the story!

In this macabre painting the predominantly light shape of the female literally envelopes the shape of the male. We aren't shown much of either — just no more and no less than we need to grasp the artist's idea. Munch has emphasized the sensuality of his theme by focusing attention on the bare arm and long flowing hair of the woman. The over-all shape of the figures is repeated by the ominous dark shape in the background.

EDVARD MUNCH
The Vampire
Courtesy Municipal Collections of Oslo

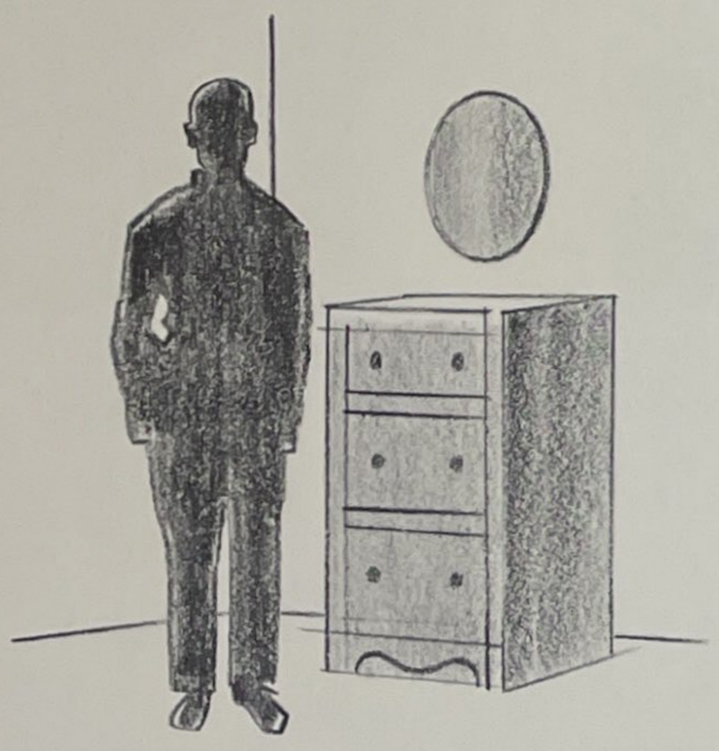
The emotion of parted souls upon reunion is expressed by these embracing women. They have rushed together; the force and direction of the action continues in their reaching arms, which show up clearly against a stark background of contrasting value. The forms themselves and the jagged lines of the background combine in a striking mood symbol of excitement. The moving drapery pattern reflects the drama of the experience.

JOSÉ CLEMENTE OROZCO
The Embrace

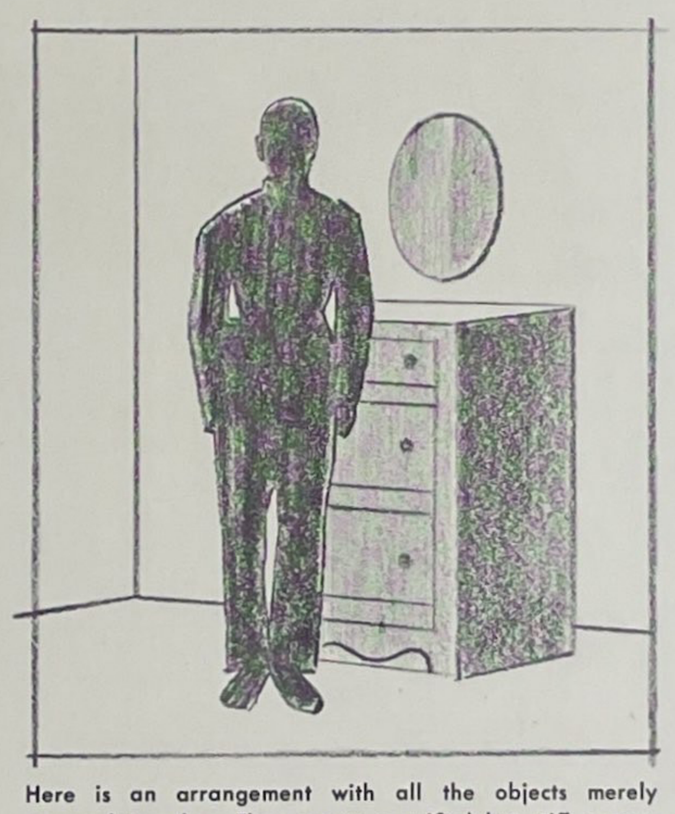
Let's add a simple setting

Most figure compositions include a place as well as people. It may be anywhere – from the corner of a room to a vast forest. The artist may show just a little of the setting or he may make it dominate his picture.

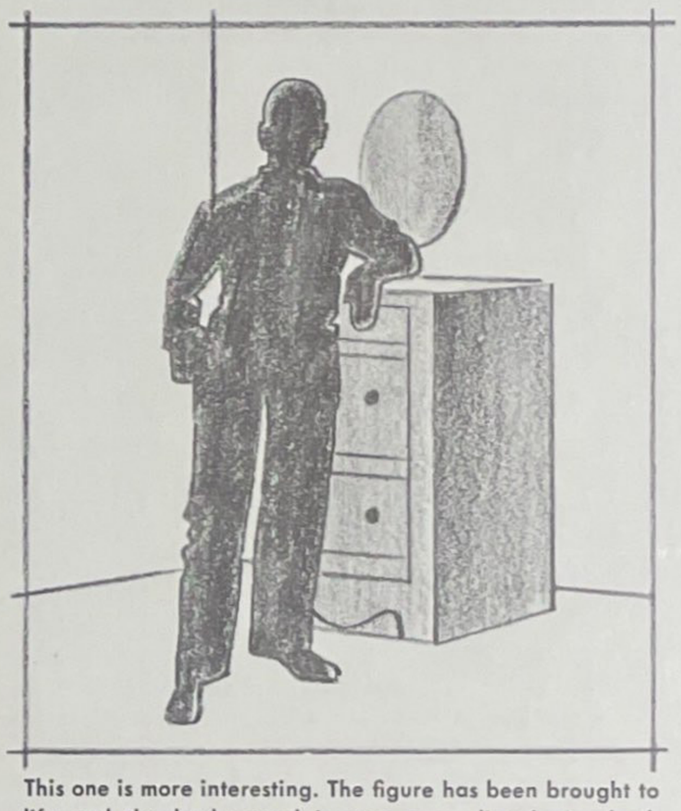
The role of the setting varies greatly. Often it simply serves as a background which tells us where the figure is. In many pictures, though, the setting is more important and the figures make actual use of it. The illustrations below are planned to introduce you, in a simple way, to the possibilities a setting offers. Whether it plays a large role or a small one in your picture, always use it to strengthen or explain the action of your figures.



A figure, a dresser, a mirror, and a corner of a room — we shall use these in several simple arrangements to see how they affect each other and the over-all composition.

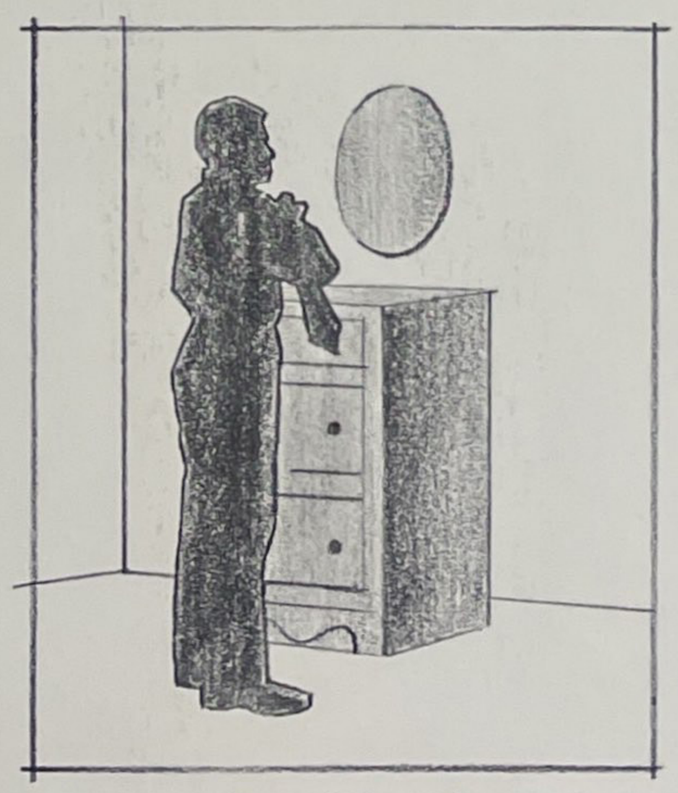


Here is an arrangement with all the objects merely grouped together. They create a unified but stiff composition. The dresser and mirror are inactive, and simply identify the setting as a corner of a bedroom.

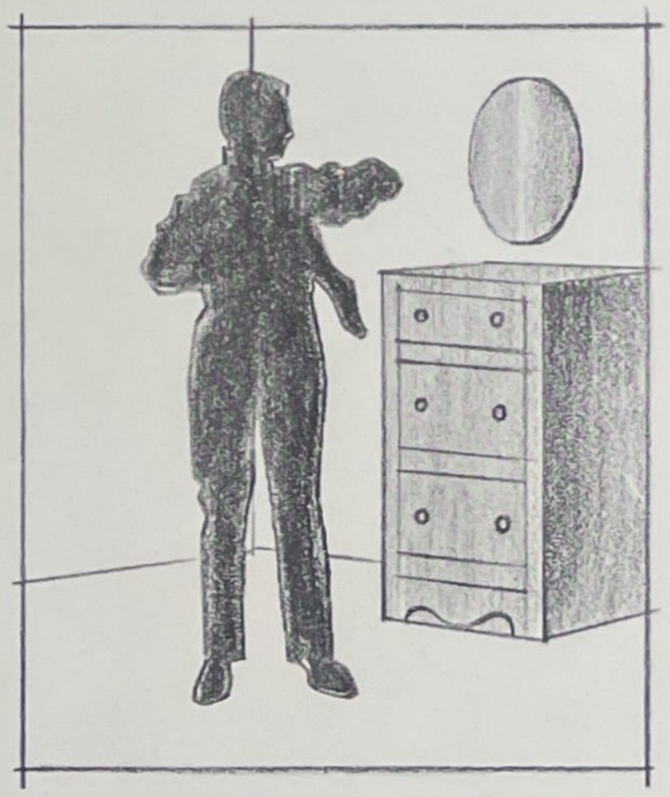


This one is more interesting. The figure has been brought to life and the background is now more directly involved. Simply because the man is leaning on the dresser, it becomes an active part of the composition.

Here, the man is about to open a drawer and the dresser becomes almost as important as he is. This arrangement is well organized. The figure and dresser are placed to make the action completely clear.



In this action the figure is looking in the mirror. Because the mirror is now more important than the dresser, the figure can logically overlap or block off more of the dresser than in the preceding picture.

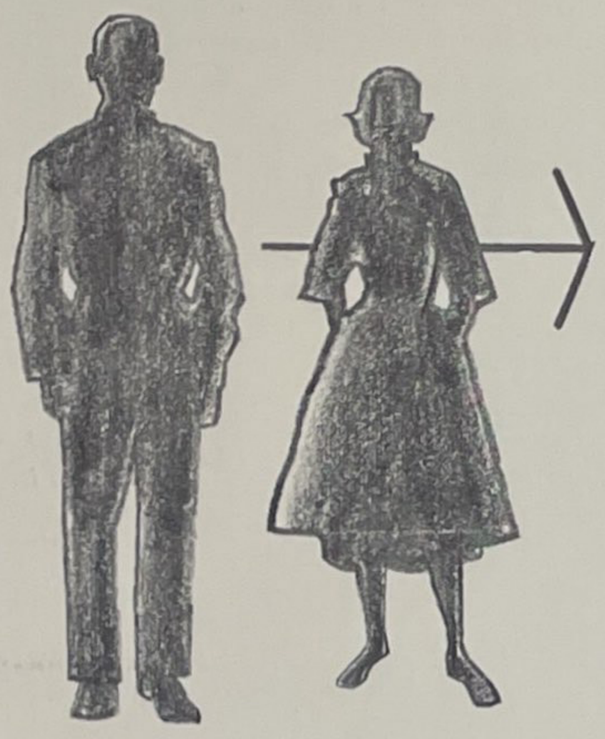


This composition is less obvious than the last one but shows the same action. It demonstrates a point to remember: Figure and object may be linked across a room by a gesture or a directional line of glance.

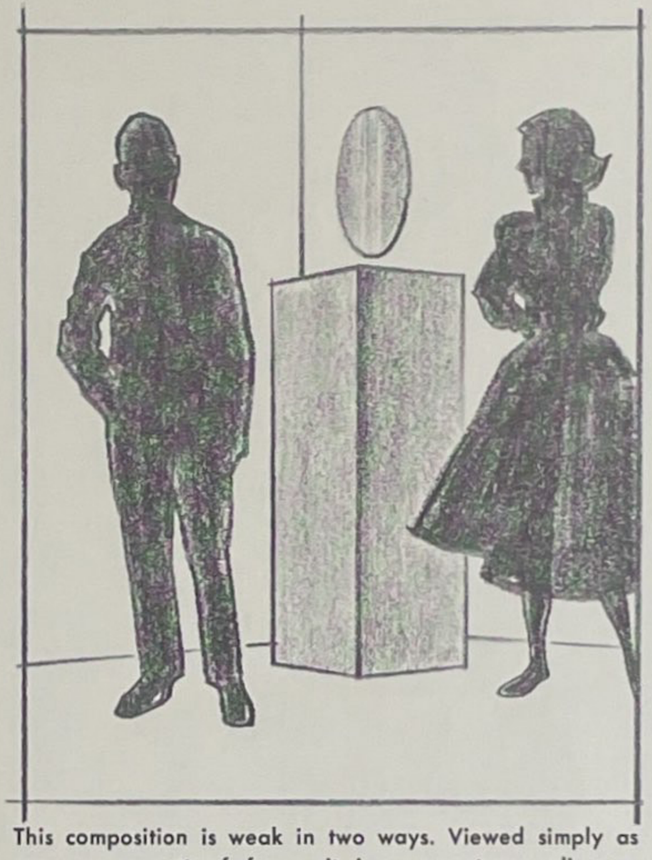
Now let's add another figure

As soon as we add another figure to our setting we create a human relationship. Our job is to see that this relationship is clear – that the two figures tell one story. As before, the setting should help to explain the story. It must not interfere with the relationship of the figures.

Since we now have a second figure in the same picture area, we must make more varied use of depth and change of size simply to get everything in.



Using the same setting as before, we will now compose with these two figures.



This composition is weak in two ways. Viewed simply as an arrangement of forms, it is a monotonous line-up. Because the dresser is centered, it tends to become as important as the figures. The mirror even interrupts the line of glance.

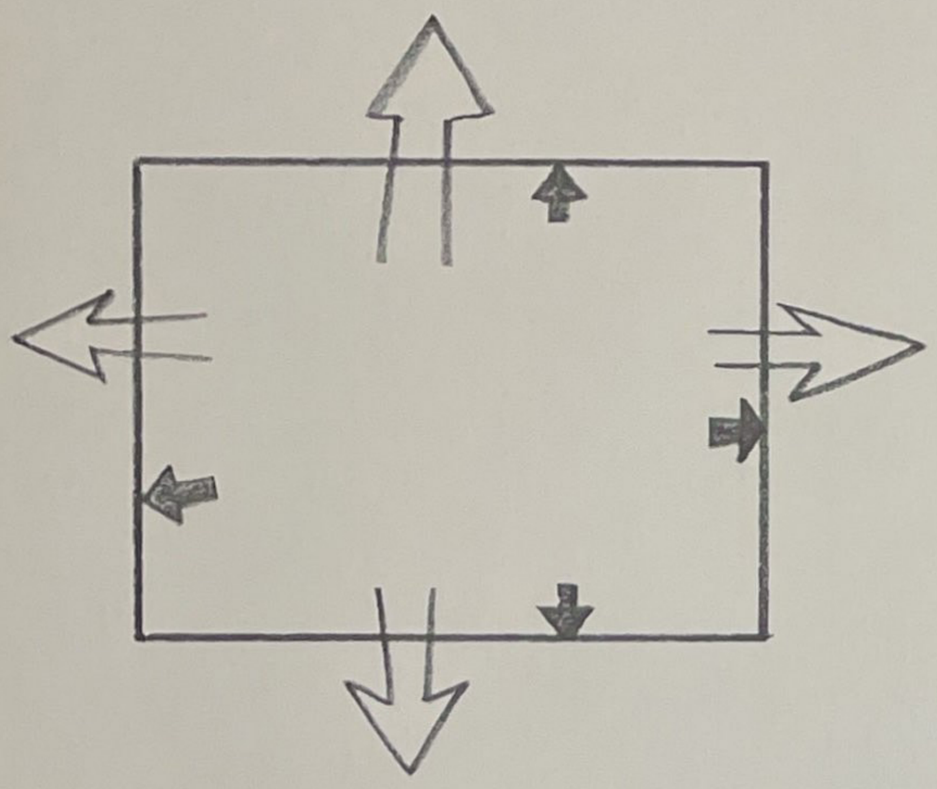
This arrangement is much better. The placement in the area is varied, and girl and dresser create a unified shape. The human relationship is uninterrupted — the man talks, the woman listens. The setting is actively involved but is not in the way.

You should always be aware of how things link up in a picture. Here, the man is related directly to the nearby mirror and to the woman, who looks at him. Overlapping and a change in sizes give the picture depth and add interest to it.

All three forms overlap, giving this arrangement considerable depth. The dresser and mirror serve mainly to set off the figure of the girl through a strong contrast of values. This is an important use to which the setting may often be put.

Line of glance and the man's gesture link the two figures closely. Dresser and man form a single shape that makes him even more dominant. At the same time the dresser, while identifying the scene, does not interrupt the human relationship.

How our picture borders affect the figure's action

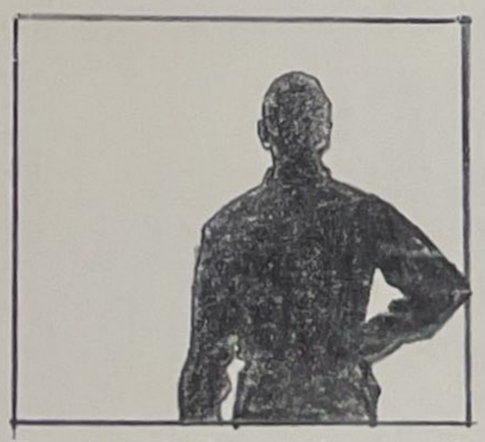


In the diagram at the left, the outline arrows suggest that there is a larger world outside the picture frame. Your placement of figures and objects must convince the viewer that such a real world exists beyond. At the same time you should never forget that the actual borders, indicated by the black arrows, are also a part of the picture. These borders can have a particularly strong effect when you are making a figure composition.

Depending on where you place the figure in relation to the borders, its action may be clear or confused. If, for example, you place a figure too close to a border, it may join up with the border, attracting the viewer's attention to the frame rather than the figure's action. Even when the figure does not touch the border, its gesture may direct the viewer's eye to the border in an undesirable way. More space between figure and border is a good remedy, as we show you below.

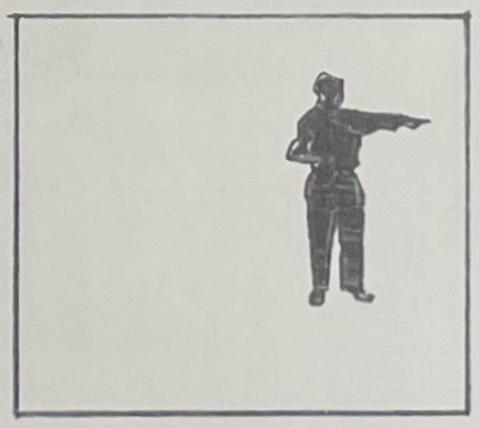
Where you place the figure within the picture frame is important in establishing figure motion. If a figure is placed nearer one border than the others, it tends to relate to it. We could say that the figure is attracted or pulled toward that border. We see the effect of this attraction in the bottom row of drawings. The proper placement of a moving figure will help greatly to speed up its action.

The border can confuse or compete

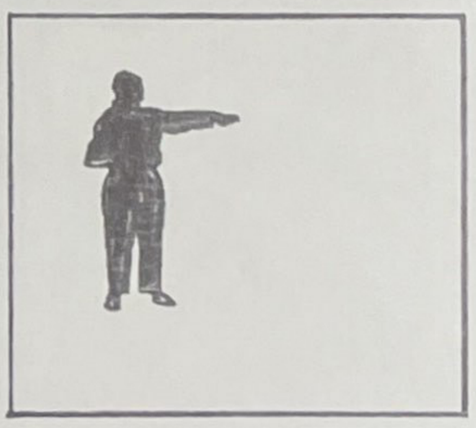


If we place the figure in the space this way, the hand-on-hip gesture pulls our eye sharply to the right border. The action is crowded by the edge of the picture — the elbow bumps the border.

The action becomes clearer when we move the figure away from the distracting border. This is strictly a matter of placement in relation to the border — the figure is exactly the same.

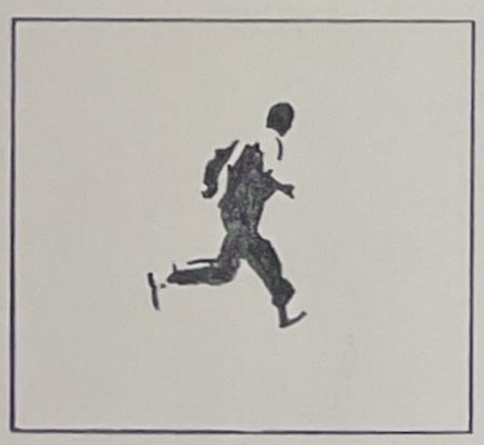


Here is an active gesture that points out a definite direction for the eye to follow. The gesture carries our eye right to the border and focuses on this edge. We look at the border rather than the action.

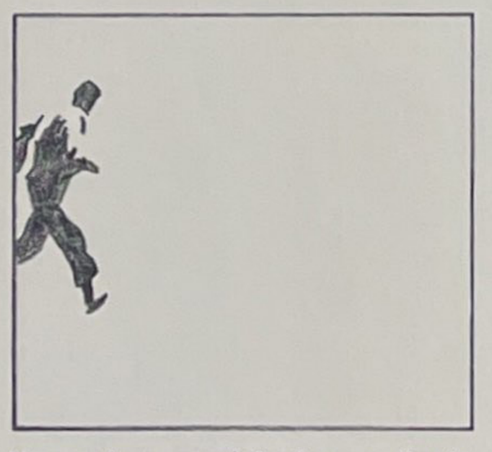


When the figure is moved back it is much easier to focus on the action itself. The border is now far enough away so that it doesn't compete with this action or become a focal point for the eye.

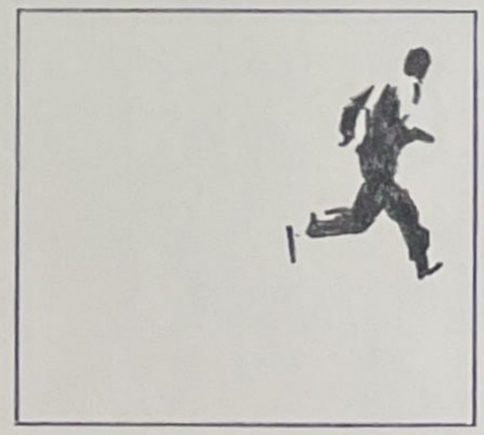
The border can help or hinder motion



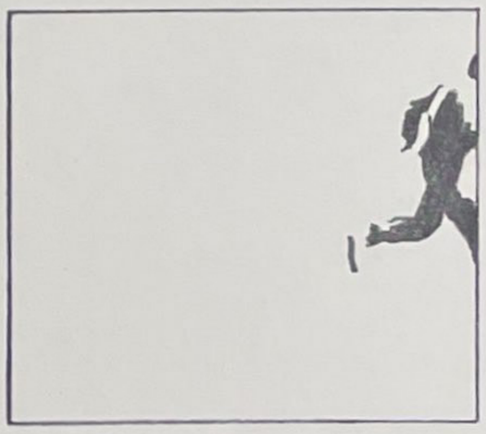
Although the figure is drawn in a running action it lacks motion because it is the same distance from each border. All four sides exert an equal attraction on the figure — it appears frozen in the center.



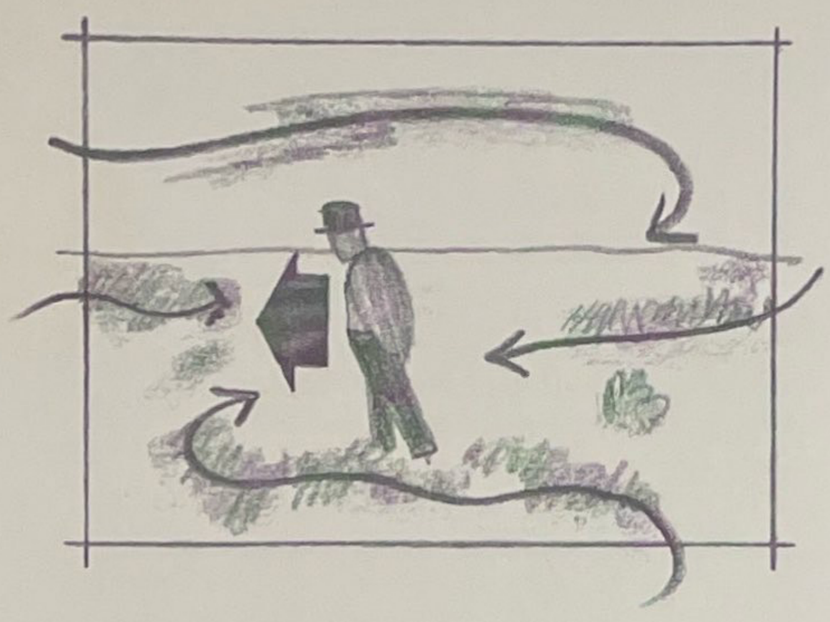
Now we have moved the figure so that it is cropped by the border. It seems to be caught on the frame — unable to free itself. The figure appears as static as it was when in the center.



In this drawing we feel a convincing sense of motion. The figure seems to race toward the near right border, which now attracts it. The space behind it suggests it has come this far.



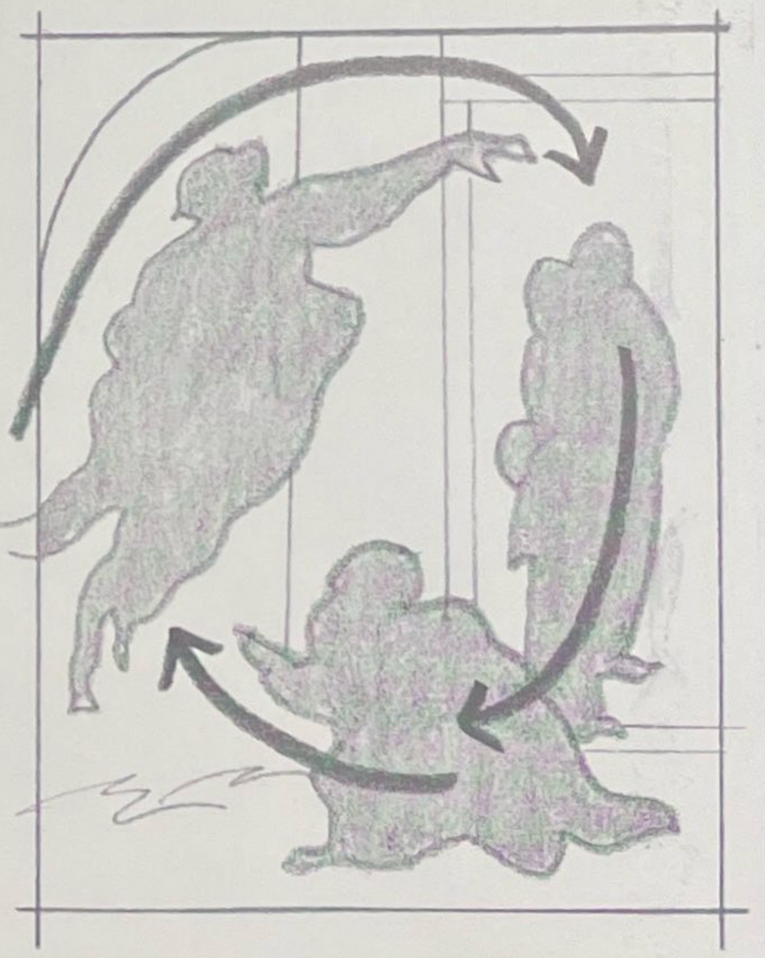
Too much of a good thing is really too much. When the figure is moved so far to the right that it becomes a part of the right border, it is as static as it appeared in the first two drawings in this row.



This painting is a good example of how you can control the figure's movement. The man is walking from right to left and is apparently headed right out of the picture. A counter-movement is set up, however, by the shape and direction of the grass as well as by the clouds. These shapes slow down the man's action and also keep bringing the viewer's attention back to him.

BEN SHAHN
Sunday Painting
Collection of Mrs. Ben Shahn

PETER PAUL RUBENS
God Commanding Noah to Build the Ark
Cabinet des Dessins, the Louvre, Paris



In this drawing, based on a painting by Raphael, God hovers over the prayerful figure of Noah, giving him instructions for the building of the Ark. The drapery anchors God and the cherubs to the left margin, so that they do not float away. Note the circular arrangement of the figures. God's outstretched left arm guides our eye to the child and his mother, whose curving posture and flowing drapery lead to Noah. His line of glance and his hands bring our attention back to the figure of God. This circular line of direction is contrasted with the vertical upright of the door.

Figure composition – by R.F. Robert Fawcett

Most of my figure paintings are started by working from the model. I start with a pictorial idea in mind, but as she takes different poses, new arrangements suggest themselves. As you see in this demonstration, I use the model first to help create the composition and then for detailed studies to know the actual form of the figure so I can depart from the norm with assurance.

Working with the model also assures that figure positions and the *shapes* created by these positions are real and convincing.

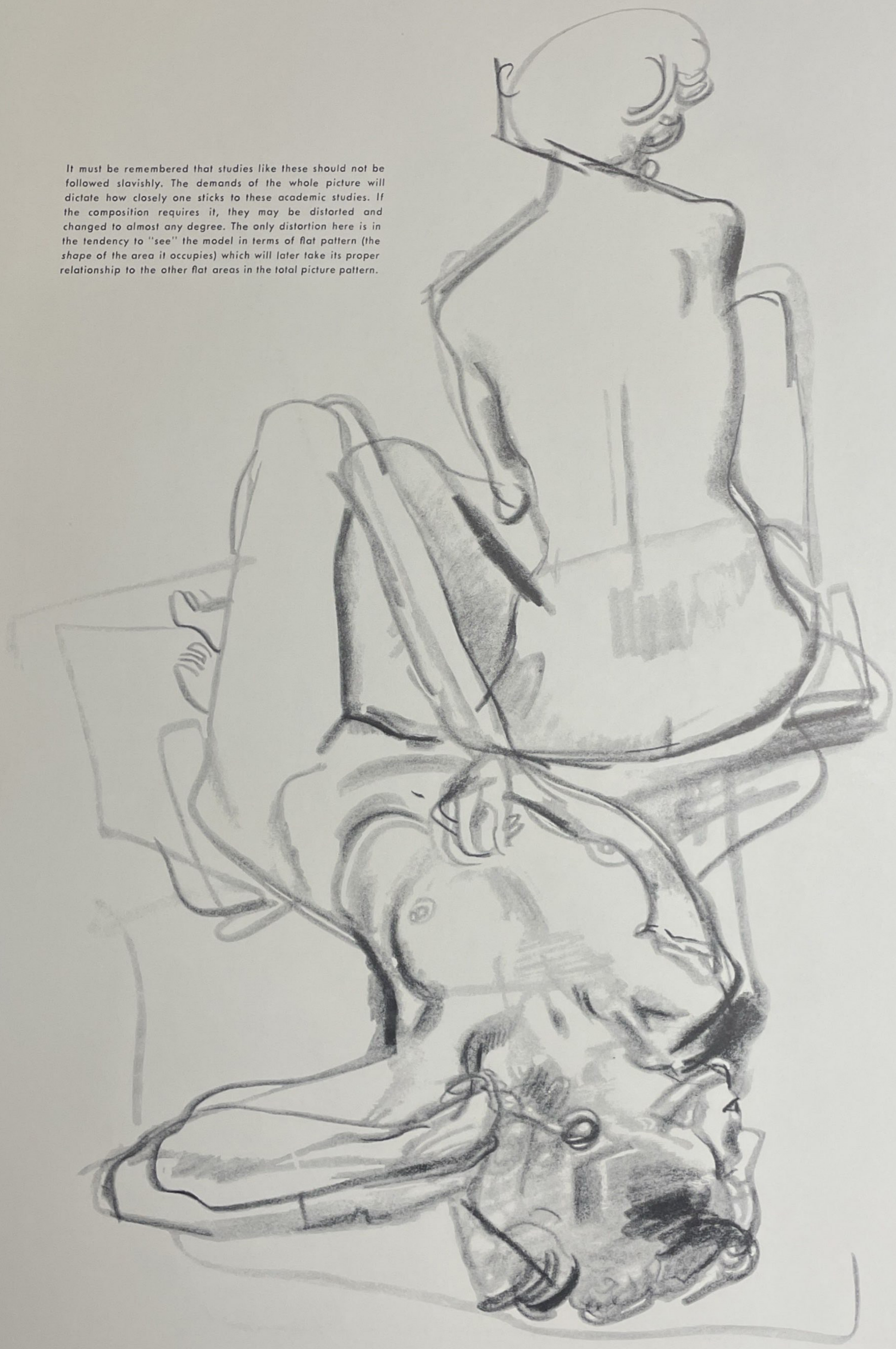
When making the final painting, I discard the model and work largely from memory. Occasionally I refer to my sketches for detail. This method gives my imagination wider scope and prevents my being too restricted by the limitations of the model.

Beginning a painting usually involves some idle scribbling beforehand. I say idle because the picture idea comes from the imagination, and paper and a fat pencil or crayon allow ideas to flow freely. The first ideas in this case are compositional ones, deciding upon the most felicitous relationship of the figures themselves within the space, and the formation of the picture idea of which they will be a part. These were drawn in roughly from the model. My *attention* and interest are on the design of the whole picture. I'm not distracted by drawing details of the figure at this stage.

In this compositional sketch I have changed the two figures on the right to get greater variety of forms, gestures and spacing. When the crayon drawing was finished, I used brush and ink to strengthen some of the lines and indicate changes to be made in the finished painting. These compositions were made 11 x 9 inches on tracing paper. They are for my guidance later.

With the general composition decided upon, I make more complete studies in red chalk, drawing directly from the model. This is with the idea of gathering factual information to use in painting. This can be done also by painting directly from the model, but drawings like this give one a more comprehensive understanding of the subject and allow one to adapt and distort for the final picture.

It must be remembered that studies like these should not be followed slavishly. The demands of the whole picture will dictate how closely one sticks to these academic studies. If the composition requires it, they may be distorted and changed to almost any degree. The only distortion here is in the tendency to "see" the model in terms of flat pattern (the shape of the area it occupies) which will later take its proper relationship to the other flat areas in the total picture pattern.

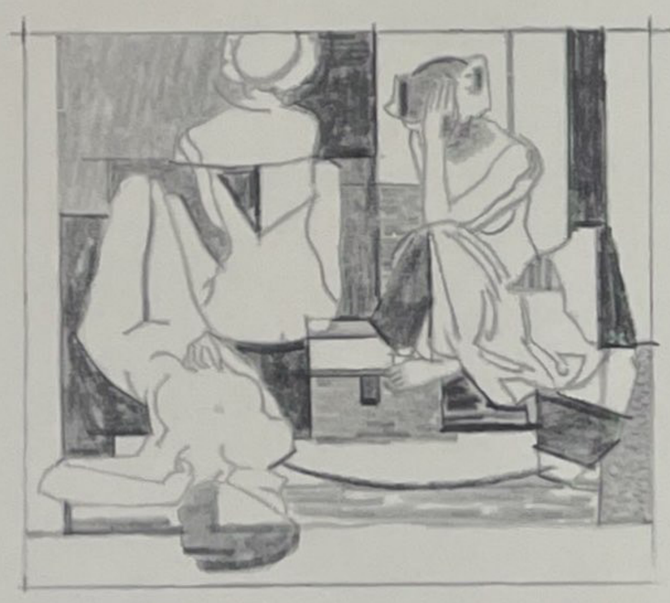


These sketches of alternate arrangements of the same figures show some of the steps I went through to arrive at the second rough sketch on page 18 – the composition I will follow in making my painting.

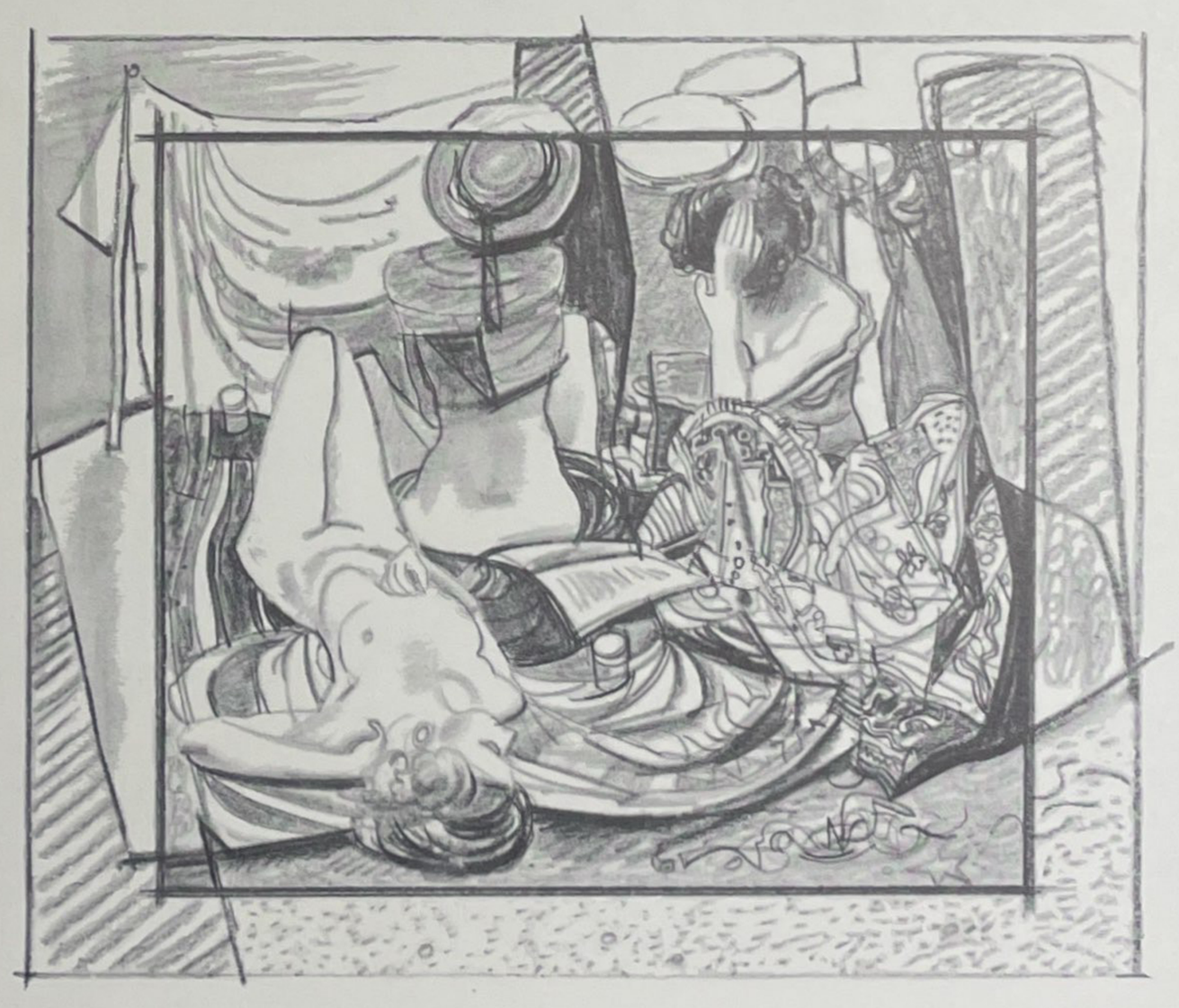
You can see that the figures do not fit together nicely — do not complement each other well at all. Everything is too lined up diagonally.

This staggered placement is less monotonous, but still the figures do not work together. They are just three unrelated figures in a space.

By moving the figures again, I've related them better. This arrangement is also more varied and interesting.



At this point I work out a pattern of light and dark to hold the picture together. I use simple rectangular shapes to form an abstract design. Once this design looks right, I use it as a foundation upon which to build realistic textures and details.



In the inner rectangle you see a further stage of the picture idea. The abstract design still shows up, although I have filled it with complicated rhythms and patterns. Now I am ready to begin painting.

The finished painting – step by step

Here is the first stage of my picture – I've begun to lay in the composition. I use black or burnt umber for this purpose. You can see that the general placement of the figures follows the sketch quite faithfully, and that I'm drawing them rather freely. From this point on, the painting grows with one's own taste and invention. The color will also be imaginary and inventive. The impact of the picture is all that counts here.

This picture is being painted on a gesso panel. I'm doing the first stage, or underpainting, in casein tempera. Then I will finish up with oil paints. The casein dries almost instantly – which enables you to draw something, then change it quickly, if you wish. After a few days, chemical changes take place which make the casein practically waterproof, in spite of its being mixed with water in the first place.

Second stage shows the beginning of pattern. Everything is tentative. I feel my way, and changes of form and color occur continually up to completion.

The idea here is to carry the picture as far along as possible before switching to oil. With care, a high degree of finish can be attained with tempera. Oil paint is a much more felicitous medium, and it works over casein very easily, but it is better to have the picture fully realized before changing mediums.

In this stage I have introduced some fine sea sand into the casein to create texture in some areas. Variety of texture is a most important aesthetic value, along with color, shape, and form. It might come as a result of continual over-painting, or it can be introduced as I have done here – by mixing fine sand and deliberately texturing areas which might otherwise be dead. Mixed with casein, the sand soon hardens to become part of the surface, and its presence lessens the temptation to indulge in finicky detail at the expense of more important qualities.

Finally, I turn to oil paint. After a light coat of retouching varnish over everything, the painting can go on as before, to heighten the impact, to make the picture more satisfying to oneself.

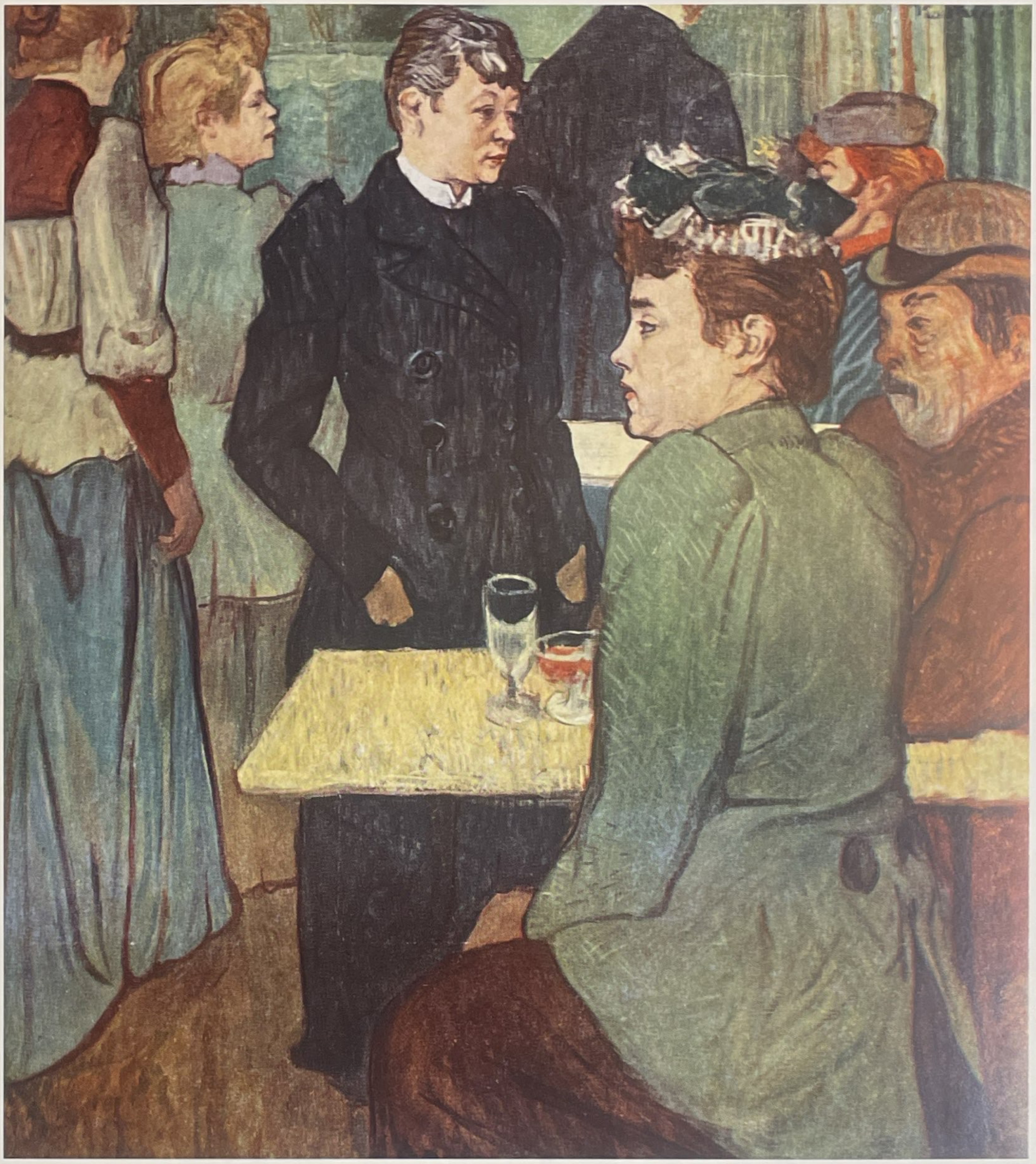
Photographic realism is not the end to strive for. The camera can do this better. I don't know how to describe the end, except perhaps that one takes ideas based on reality, and out of them one fashions a satisfying plastic whole. This is much more than just creating a design based on formalized shapes.

It is difficult to say exactly what motivates the painter, for each one paints from his own individuality and, as an expression of the personality, whatever he or she does is completely valid. (Here we run the risk of venturing into aesthetics, which would be fascinating but we are trying to limit this to technical explanation.)

The method I used to paint this picture is known as glazing. In glazing, you thin oil paint with medium and make transparent washes, which you then brush over any areas that you want to modify or model. You can use your washes over large areas to tone them down, draw them together, or separate them from others. With these transparent washes you can also refine or model small areas very subtly. This technique has been used for hundreds of years. It is put to different uses for different purposes.

The painter always ends by making his own experiments and the result is a personal style. It is not bad to try different methods. What does not come easily and naturally will be discarded, but what is retained and digested will make your final style more comprehensive and profound. Originality is rarely a natural state, and most often is the result of great study and application, led on by a lively imagination.

HENRI TOULOUSE-LAUTREC
Corner of the Moulin de la Galette
From the Chester Dale Collection



The charm of this painting lies largely in the combination of very earthy personalities in a design of the most aristocratic elegance. The horizontal plane of the table top meets the vertical plane of the central standing figure to establish a monumental strength within the composition. Around this central figure other figures are arranged in two groups at right and left. Depth is suggested by overlapping, silhouetting, and by measuring off space visually in terms of the table tops. Essentially, however, the composing is done on the surface of the picture. Beautifully and sensitively patterned shapes interlock with the precision of a jig-saw puzzle. Notice how lines are carried through from one figure to another, and how these serve to bring the eye to the chief center of interest — the central standing figure.

National Gallery of Art. Washington, D.C. (Chester Dale Collection)

PICASSO. Family of Saltimbanques

The children are grouped around the central figure of the father at the left, and balanced against the mother at the right. Mother and family are tied together through color, and perhaps even more by sight lines and repetitions of shapes. The head and upper body of the little boy in the middle, for example, are like a smaller echo of the mother's pose, as though he were still her shadow in spite of his new-found independence. The older boy, firmly attached to the male group, is also strongly related to his mother. Even the mature youth looks in her direction. The psychological ties revealed by the sight lines are very important here in creating balance and unity.

OROZCO. The Teacher

The painting is symbolic, and therefore the forms are generalized. Quite literally the children sit "at their mother's knee," forming a triangular relationship of the three heads. Sight lines tie the three heads together, with the flowing drapery lines between the mother's knees relating the children. The triangular pattern set up by the three heads is repeated in a variety of ways throughout the composition. The teacher's pose, in its almost arbitrary formality, suggests the dignity and authority we associate with this relationship.

REMBRANDT. Christ Healing the Sick ("The Hundred Guilder Print")

The central figure of Christ, isolated and elevated, commands the composition. On either side are balanced groups of figures—seventeen at the right, twenty-one on the left. Each is a carefully studied personality. At the same time these figures hold together as a group because they have been worked into a silhouetted pattern. The upper edge of the pattern leads the eye to the dominant center of interest. The drawing communicates a great sense of peace and dignity, in spite of the involved material. This is due chiefly to the fact that the "busy" material has been carefully controlled within a limited space, while the majority of the picture area is blocked out in great patterns of light and dark.

GOYA. Three Majas and Three Men Dancing

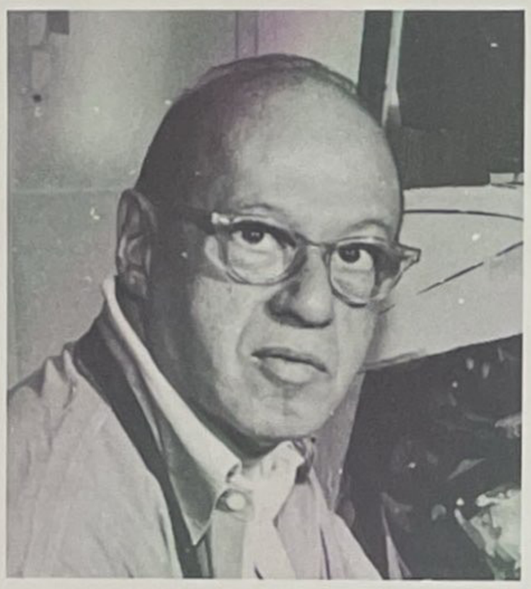
The subject itself suggested a circular organization; the figures are strung like beads on a necklace. Notice how much excitement the staccato rhythm of hands and heads creates. The movement of the dance is exaggerated in the diagonal pose of the men and the figure of the woman at the right, impossibly off balance. The broken pattern of light and shadow at the feet of the figures contributes to the busy statement of the action. The soft edge of light above the horizon serves to tie the figures together and provides a contrasting area against which the dark forms can be silhouetted.

This was the first sketch. It seemed too much of a story because of details that were not needed.

This is better, without overhead light or wires and dials. But comic quality is too dominant.

Figure composition

Joseph Hirsch



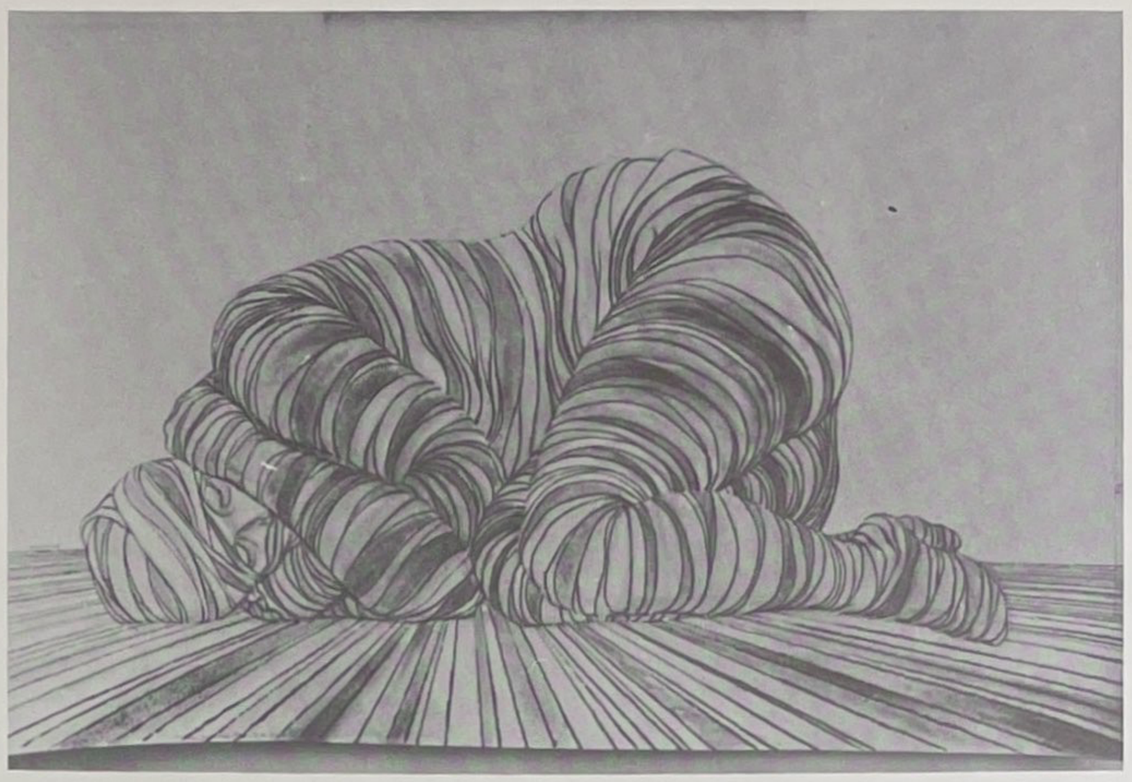
Here are some examples of my work that indicate how an idea-feeling becomes a painted image. Needless to say, the inner promptings that determine the outcome of a painting must be your own. That's what painting is.

The purpose in selecting these particular paintings is to point out that you do not settle for the *first* image, nor do you always have to *elaborate* on that first image to fill a canvas with compositional excitement. The direction you take—whether you elaborate or subtract—depends on what you want to say, and it should be said as directly as possible.

In the painting *Rich Man* my first sketch includes detail that was used to identify the scene, but as I developed the sketch it became apparent that this identification was not needed. The stethoscope and the attitude of the figures were sufficient to tell my story, as you can see in the next sketch. However, now the great bulk of the figure tended to make the situation too comical. I had placed too much emphasis on this aspect of the picture.

The final painting, at the right, illustrates how simplification has strengthened the purpose of the picture. I still feel it is a bit too funny, a bit too anecdotal, but it carries out my intention. The patient is the main theme, the doctor the accompaniment.

Pruning the picture severely, as well as lightening the key by eliminating the dark clothing, was a help to the final result.



The drawings on this page show some of the stages of development of the canvas *Northern Lights,* on the facing page. You can see that the picture expanded from a single element to a complex idea-feeling.

The problems of picture space, number of figures to use, tonal key all developed slowly—but always a single idea prevailed. In a painting it is disastrous to give equal importance to a number of things at the expense of the *one* overall theme.

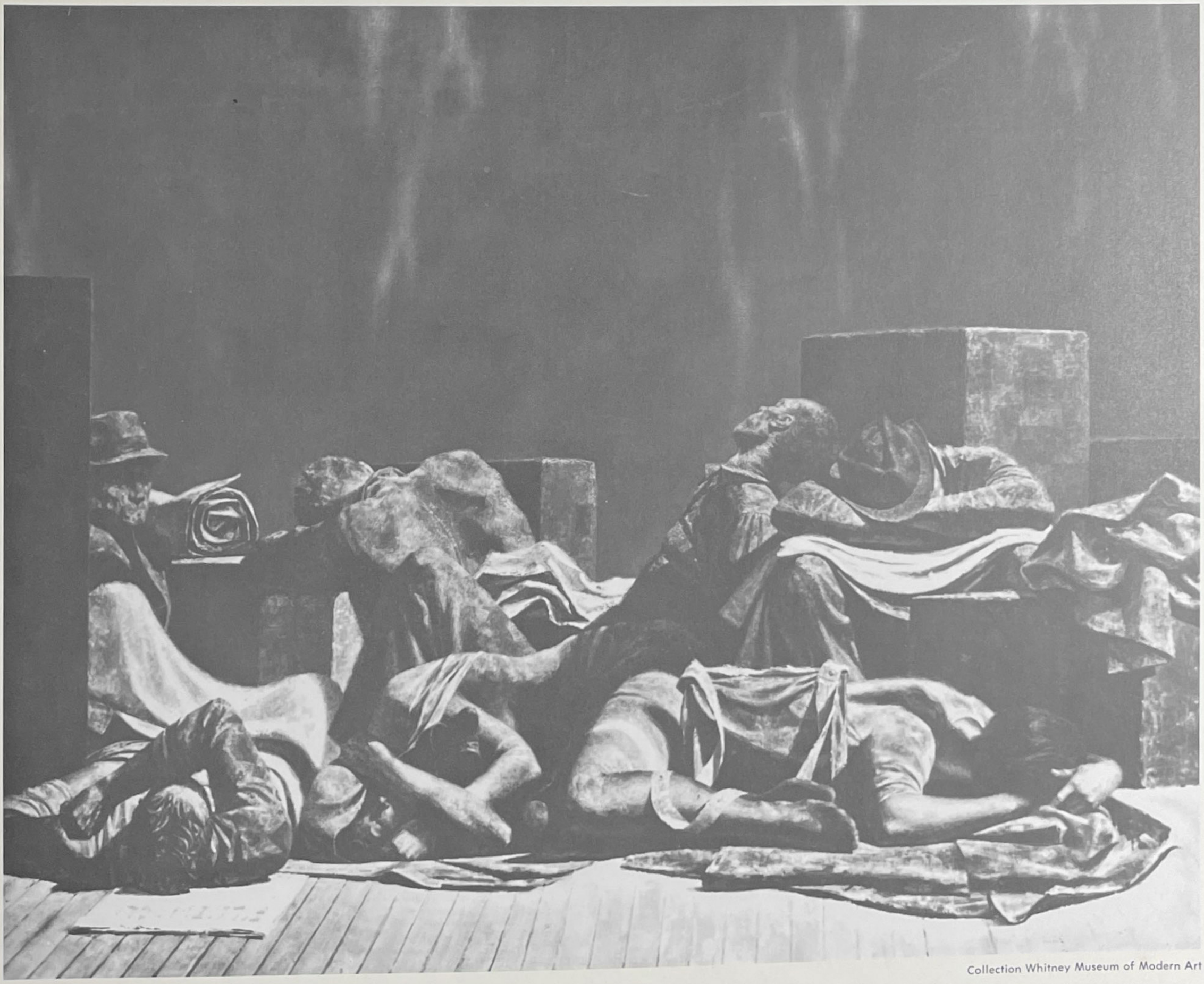
The development of the canvas *Northern Lights* is in sharp contrast to the subtraction, or pruning, which was necessary with the painting *Rich Man*. It's a two-way street; oversimplification requires you to add, overcomplication to subtract.

In this instance, a sketch of my sleeping model (upper left sketch) led to a later drawing of a figure covered with ribbonlike wrappings. Wanting to explore further the theme of sleep in an elaboration of repeating rhythms, I added many figures.

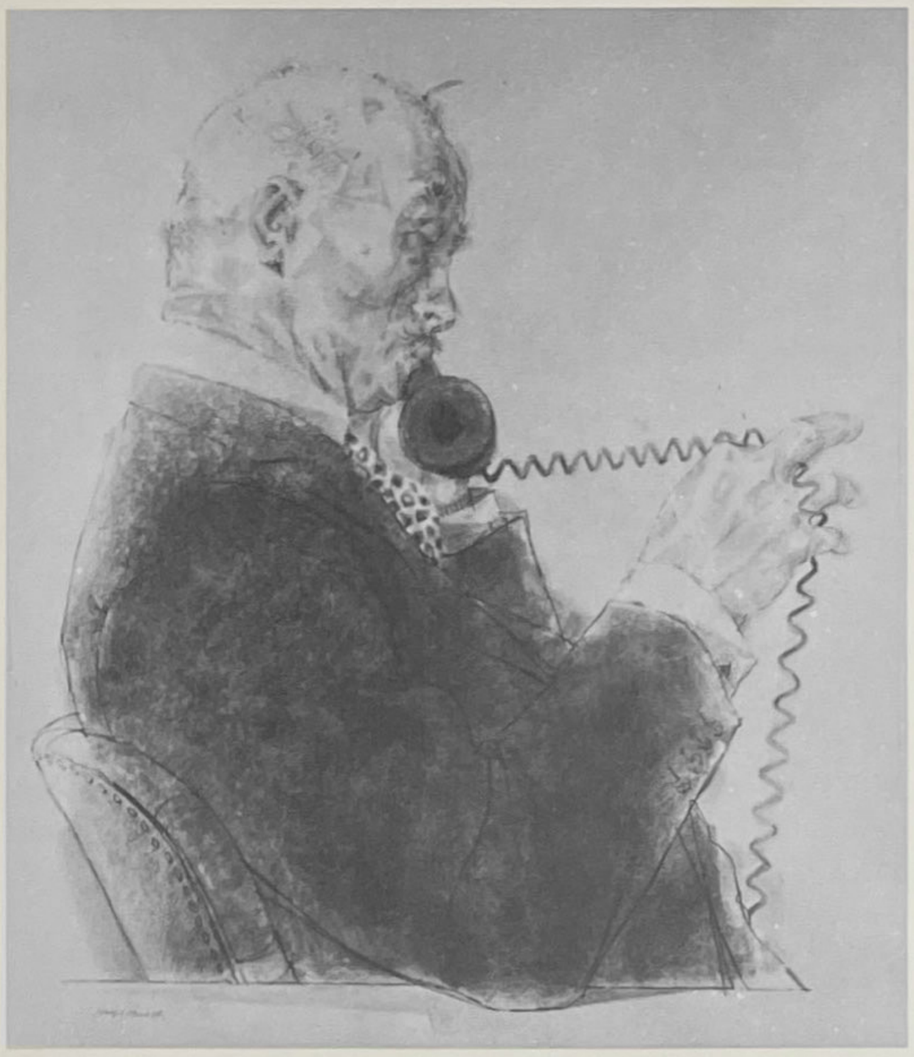
The two very small thumbnail pen sketches illustrate my search for the placement of the figures on the canvas.

To produce the feeling I was after, I divided the canvas into an active, compact section below and an empty area above. This latter has a tranquilizing effect on the lower portion. Cover the upper part and notice how the arrangement of light and dark forms seems crowded and full of movement. Now, raise the curtain by revealing the sky and see how stillness replaces the motion. And so I was able to convey resting figures in a complex design.

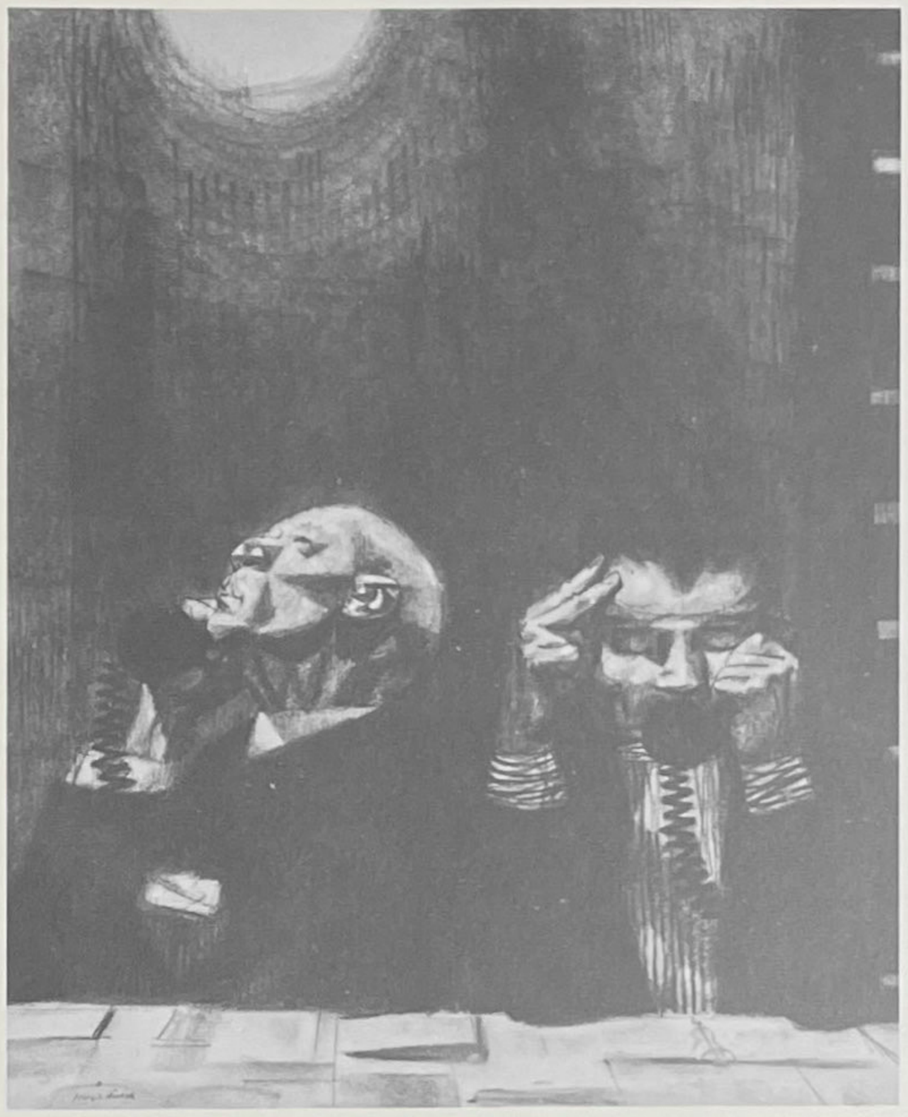
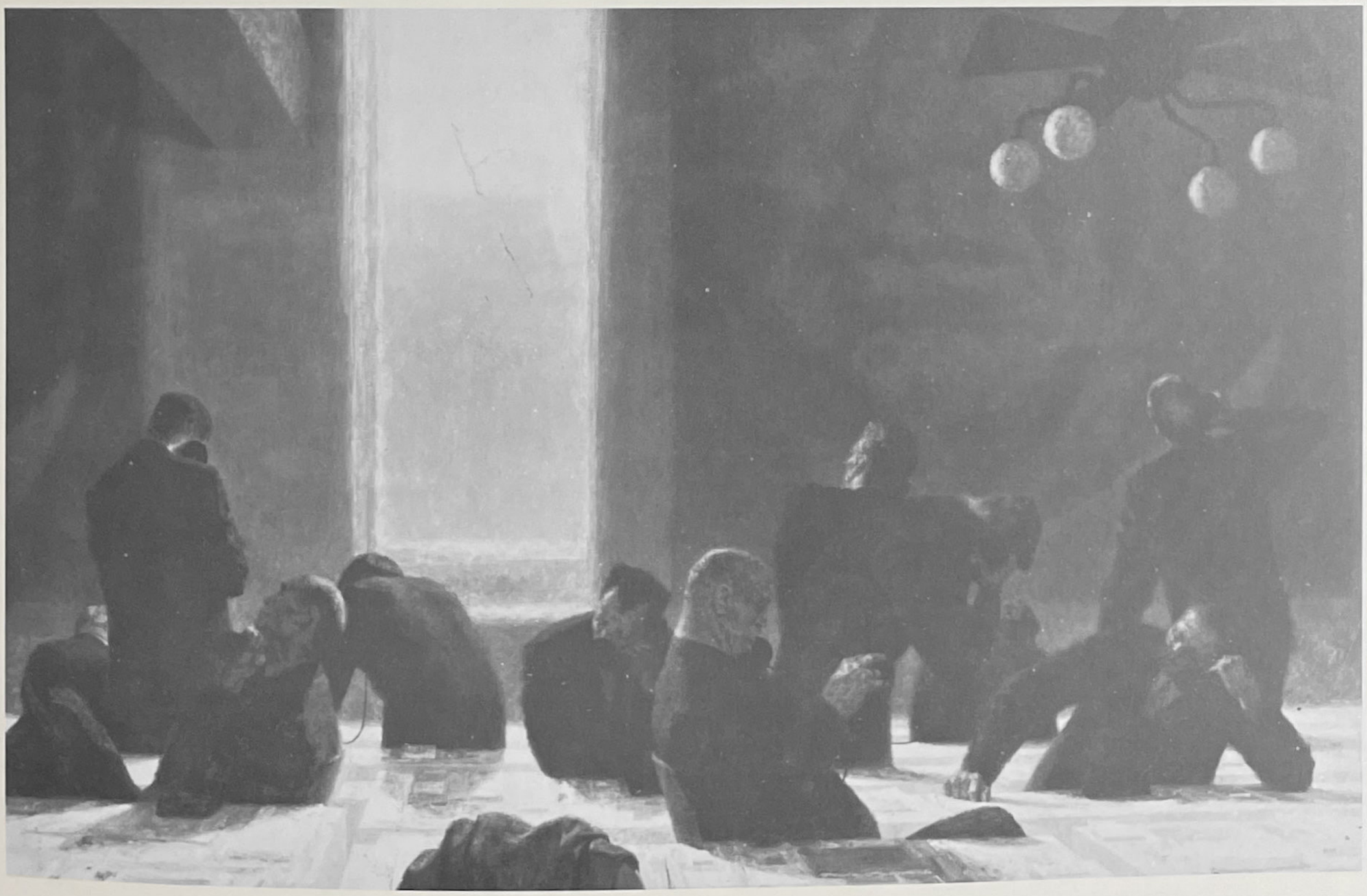
The composing of many figures is not an easy problem. It calls for sweat and tears and a dedication to the thing which an artist wants to do. These small studies on the opposite page barely touch on the searching and digging that goes into making a painting. The results of your work will be in proportion to your effort.



Collection Whitney Museum of Modern Art



These three pictures, if seen upside down, have nothing in common. In size, arrangement, and value they are markedly different. One idea, however, triggered all three: the pervasive reign over man by the telephone and, through implication, by technology. Each picture was done independently of the others.

Once stimulated by an idea, you should explore the subject fully, adding and subtracting until the composition contains the essential material to tell your story. This calls for devotion, for painting is not easy. Talent is not enough. Taste is a prerequisite. So is stamina—the search for all creative choices.

Although my work does not deal entirely with the figure, I am stirred most directly by the human form. It is hard to pinpoint just why this is so. I suppose that it springs from empathy with other human beings. As British art historian Sir Kenneth Clark observes, "The subjects that artists have chosen . . . have often been . . . unimportant. . . . But the human body, as a nucleus, is rich in associations, and when turned into art these associations are not entirely lost."